1 PURPOSE AND METHOD

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Use in the Classroom

Prophets of secularism keep on predicting the demise of religion: given the dramatic discoveries of science, they argue, it is only a matter of time before religion disappears. Yet each obituary seems a little premature. Neanderthal humans living 150,000 years ago were intensely religious and, despite all the progress and numerous differences between then and now, they share this characteristic with the majority of citizens in the United States today. Religion continues to survive and thrive despite its secular opponents.

Yet religious people in the secular West cannot ignore the challenge of secularism. So many assumptions made in our schools, colleges, and universities constantly question the value of religion. Can one affirm scientific discoveries and still be religious? Is it possible to be tolerant of diversity and be religious? Does everyday common sense make religion plausible or practical? This is a Reader intended for those who find themselves interested in religion, yet aware of and wanting to engage with these questions.

The final chapter will explore the case for secular humanism. Science, philosophy, and concern for a tolerant society all come together to insist that religion is both untrue and damaging. The rest of the book invites each of the major religious traditions in turn to explain how the given tradition is coherent and helpful to society. Each chapter invites the reader to enter into dialogue by empathizing with each religion in turn. Each attempts to present its tradition in a sympathetic light. You do not have to agree, but you will be invited to understand.

This opening chapter is intended to explain the interpretative structure and method that will be used in this Reader. So first, I shall outline what this book is not. Second, I shall attempt to define the subject matter of this Reader. Here we shall examine briefly the thorny question of the definition of "religion." Third, I shall define the approach adopted here against alternative approaches used in other comparable texts, and defend it against possible criticism. And, finally, I shall explain how best to use the text in the classroom. Much that follows will be quite demanding and it is required reading for those planning to use the text in teaching. However, for those simply interested in religion, it is perfectly possible to skip the rest of this chapter and move to the next chapter on indigenous spirituality.

The Purpose

This is first and foremost a Reader. To understand a tradition, one needs to access the sources that define or typify that tradition. Ideally one needs to learn the necessary language(s), and then read the scriptures or other texts of the tradition in the original. But most of us do not have the time (let alone the skill) to master all the relevant languages. So turning to good translations can provide a helpful way in (though translations can never be perfect and free from interpretations). A Reader brings together significant texts. At the end of each chapter one must be sensitive to the complexities of each tradition. Every one of them has had a long and enormously complex history. Many thousands of men and women have grappled with these texts for an entire lifetime; no course in the study of religion would be satisfactory if it did not leave the student slightly (well, extremely) confused.

This book is not a comprehensive history of each tradition. A religious history is a history of entire cultures. Every detail of a history is subject to appropriate scholarly disagreement; historical judgments are very difficult to form. Understanding the history of a people (and therefore a religious tradition) is an important task, but this is not the primary purpose of a Reader. Dates and descriptions will be mentioned, but they are not prominent. Texts are interpreted from the vantage point of contemporary believers within that tradition. This is taken to provide the primary meaning. This Reader attempts to understand the ways in which these traditions operate now. Thus the historical or the original meaning of the text will not necessarily be identified, though some texts are included largely for their historical interest.

This book is not a systematic survey of all the strands of each tradition. Put two humans together, and disagreements seem inevitable. Each tradition divides again into numerous subdivisions. So Christianity divides into Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. Protestants divide into Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists – to name but a few. On the whole this Reader has assumed the vantage point of a thinking, sensitive, orthodox adherent of each tradition. Major divisions of each tradition are taken account of (e.g. Roman Catholicism and

Protestantism within Christianity, Sunni and Shia within Islam). But for more detail about the different schools, one needs to refer to a history or encyclopedia of religion.

This book is not a substantial analysis of the belief (or ritual or ethical) systems of each tradition. Numerous books have analyzed, for example, the "no-self" doctrine of Buddhism. Many others have attempted to make the debate accessible to students. Instead of the rawness of a primary text, these books offer interpretative schemes to make sense of these traditions. Writers of these books work with the primary texts and provide the fruits of their scholarship to solve the many problems that they raise. These are important books, and they need to be studied. However, they ought to be studied *after* (or perhaps running in parallel with) the hard work of grappling with the primary texts. This is the purpose of a Reader.

So having established that this book is not a comprehensive history of each religion, nor a systematic survey of the diversity within each tradition, nor a substantial critique of religious beliefs, it is necessary to establish positively what it is. The purpose of Readers is to make available primary texts – texts from scriptures, texts from authorities, texts from scholars, and texts from converts. There is an awkwardness in this task. Most of the texts were not written with the expectation that they would be studied in a twenty-first-century classroom. Inconsistencies were never ironed out. Ambiguous points were not clarified. St. Paul did not expect his letter to the Roman church to become a foundational text for the Christian Church and therefore subject to centuries of argument. Religion would be much easier if one could concentrate on the secondary sources. But this would miss so much. The primary texts expose both the brilliance and the bumbling confusion that lie at the heart of most innovation. It is the brilliance that justifies the study; it is the confusion that makes the study so hard.

This then is the nature of the Reader. It brings together some of the most significant texts. The accompanying commentary is designed only to ease the reader into the text. It should be read alongside a substantial introduction to these religious traditions. As a "World Religions Reader," we now need to examine precisely what this is a Reader of. In other words, what do we mean by the word "religion"?

Defining Religion

Consider the following definition of religion:

> The real characteristic of religious phenomena is that they always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things.[1]

Emile Durkheim, the brilliant sociologist, offered this definition after his careful study of primitive societies. It is a definition that stresses the distinction between the sacred and the profane. This definition highlights, implicitly, the rituals and practices of a religion, and indicates that these overt religious practices are justified by a sense of the sacred. Now although this distinction is an important feature of much religion, it is by no means universal. Confucianism, for example, is not primarily preoccupied with it. Furthermore, Durkheim's definition enabled him to reduce the significance of religion to its societal role. For example, the sense of the sacred is evoked within the individual by needs and conditions imposed by the greater entity – society as a whole. In other words, Durkheim's definition stresses that feature of religion that served his academic interests and purposes. He has ensured that sociology should be the paramount discipline for understanding religion. Freud defined religion in terms of transference and illusion, and hidden in his definition was the assumption that psychology is the key to illuminate the nature of religion.[2]

Even more overtly theological definitions of religion end up making the same mistake. So Paul Tillich, for example, defines religion thus:

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[1] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1915), p. 41.
[2] I am grateful to Peter Byrne and Peter Clarke who illustrate this point with appropriate rigor in their important book *Definition and Explanation in Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1993).

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life. Therefore this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite concern which is in conflict with it.[3]

This is a major theme found throughout Tillich's work and he may well have identified correctly the attitude of most committed religious people. However, as a definition, it ignores all those who are nominal in their allegiances. Such people might still consider themselves religious, but do not feel it requires what they would probably see as a fanatical identification with a tradition. Furthermore, this definition ignores the content of religion (no mention of any beliefs in the supernatural); it simply concentrates on the attitude of religious people. The problem is that the same attitude can be found in politics or the arts. Some Marxists, for example, treat their commitment to the Revolution as their "ultimate concern," but they would certainly not want to be described as religious.[4] This tendency to define religion in such a way that one picks out what one thinks matters most is almost universal. In each case, one species or another of reductionism is at work.

It is difficult to see how we can find a definition that embraces "Confucianism" (mainly an ethical system) and "Christianity" (emphasizing a revelation of God in Christ). We have already seen with Durkheim, Freud, and Tillich how many of the most influential definitions of "religion" have hidden implications about the nature and significance of religion and how limited they are. Definitions are not "value free." From each discipline or standpoint a definition is offered, and each produces a different key to unlock the secrets of religion.

Perhaps the way out of the definition problem is to follow the advice of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein felt that it was a mistake to search for the essence of a "thing" which would embrace everything in that category. Con-

sider the word "game." It is very difficult to formulate a definition that embraces all games. If, for example, we try to define games around the word "sociable," we could not include the card game solitaire. If we try to define games around "entertainment," again we find problems. This would include activities like films, which are not games, and exclude other activities, which some find anything but entertaining but many would see as undoubtedly a "game," like bull-fighting. Instead, suggested Wittgenstein, certain defining words will cover some instances and exclude others, and other definitions will link in with each other. It is like a rope with no particular strand linking every part, but different strands linking different parts, making a certain integrity for the whole. So some religions are metaphysical, others are more ethical, while others again are more preoccupied with ritual. Others stress orthodoxy (correct belief) while others think orthopraxis (correct action) is central.[5] As far as our present purpose is concerned, the point of this flexible approach is that no judgment about the significance of religion in general or of certain traditions in particular is implied by inclusion in the volume. Religion is not necessarily about "worshipping God" or "having a certain lifestyle." Indeed as we start the study of the religious phenomena, prepare to be surprised by the diverse forms it takes in the world.

After Wittgenstein the quest for an all-embracing definition that captures the essence of all forms of religion is no longer appropriate. Nevertheless a writer's attempt at a definition sets the contours for subsequent analysis. So, with modesty and for practical purposes, I offer a "definition" of religion that both underlies and embraces the descriptions that follow in this book. **Religion, for me, is a way of life (one which embraces a total world-view, certain ethical demands, and certain social practices) that refuses to accept the secular[6] view that sees human life as nothing more than complex bundles of atoms in an ultimately meaningless universe**.

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[3]   Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press 1963), p. 6.
[4]   For a good discussion of Durkheim and Tillich's definition of religion, see W. Richard Comstock, *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religions* (New York: Harper & Row 1972) pp. 18–27. I am grateful for his illuminating discussion of the problems involved in defining religion.

[5]   Byrne and Clarke make this suggestion: see *Definition and Explanation in Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1993), pp. 28–78.
[6]   Timur Yuskaev correctly points out that the word "secular" has different meanings in different contexts. The meaning used here describes the "aggressive atheism" found in the West. The word "secular" in many Muslim countries, for example, simply means "non-observant."

Positively, this definition stresses the potentially all-embracing nature of religion; negatively, it stresses the religious hostility to the modern secular world-view. Not all those who call themselves "religious" would necessarily agree that religion is all-embracing, but the role-models in all traditions (Jesus, the Buddha, etc.) do set just such an ideal. And even the most anti-metaphysical form of Buddhism would concede that reductionist science is a distortion of the way the world is. Certainly, a textbook concentrating on the "orthodox" (i.e. traditional and widespread beliefs) strands of all traditions would accept this definition as capturing an essential element of their tradition.

"Secular humanism" then is not a religion, although curiously it does share certain features with religion. Secular humanists often see themselves as detached from religion; they stand outside and view religion as "observers." In many societies they have established a kind of normative status. Despite the considerable strength of religious communities, the perception prevails that religion is in decline and increasingly irrelevant – a perception often accepted by religious people themselves. The media seem to define the secular as the norm and the religious as odd. And where the practices surrounding religion have declined, religion becomes an anthropological curiosity. For many in the West, religion provokes feelings of strangeness: what an odd way to dress! How peculiar it is to be so pre-occupied with metaphysical issues! Yet what this attitude overlooks is that the secularized liberal Westerner is as strange to the religious adherent as religious adherents are to secularized Westerners (even though some religious people may live simultaneously in both worlds). Since death is the only certainty in our short lives (short, that is, compared with eternity), how can one be so presumptuous as to disregard the religious dimension of life? With the almost universal testimony of all other cultures (both historical and global) that we are not simply bundles of atoms facing extinction when we die, how dare the West assume a metaphysic of scientific reductionism? Indifference to religion is a "world-view" and not merely a set of natural attitudes. And the factors that generated Western indifference have a history with major texts that attract converts. In other words, the Western secularist outlook, to which we are referring here as "secular humanism," has many similarities with a religious tradition. It is even a significant starting point for many teachers and students

of religion, and offers a major challenge for the religious to answer.

This broadly post-modern insight is crucial. We need to become much more sensitive to what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the tradition-constituted nature of all enquiry.[7] All of us approach questions from a given vantage point. There is no neutral standpoint from which all questions can be evaluated. We cannot transcend all cultures and peer down from on high. Being committed to Christianity as the fullest revelation of God, or an advocate of religious pluralism (i.e. all religions are equally valid and legitimate), or an indifferent secularist are all positions that have emerged from a culture with a history and have been formulated around texts. In these senses at least, all are on the same footing.

Competing Methodologies

Having given some sense of what this Reader takes religion to be and to signify, I must now decide on the appropriate methodology. As we have already seen, methodology cannot be easily derived from questions about definition, so it is helpful to discuss method questions under a separate heading. Methodology questions come in two parts. First, we have the question of **approach**. Are we committed to objectivity (e.g. in the form of a historical-comparative method or a phenomenological method) or are we more confessional (taking our stance within, for example, Islam or Christianity)? Second, we have the questions of **content**. For example, do we assume the sociological perspective when grappling with religion as the best way of identifying its significant elements? Or do we take its "official" list of tenets and prescriptions? I shall now deal with these two questions in turn.

I propose to discuss four different *approaches* to the teaching and study of religious studies. These are (a) the historical-comparative method, (b) the phenomenological method, (c) the confessional approach, and (d) the empathetic approach. The first two have dominated the religious studies scene since the 1960s.[8]

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7 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth 1988).

8 For a superb history of the study of comparative religion, see Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth 1986).

The historical-comparative method suggests that the study of religion should involve a comparison of the historical formulations of each tradition. It seeks to demonstrate historical connections and differences, thereby identifying independent occurrences of similar phenomena. Two assumptions need to be made explicit: first, that it is possible to access an "objective" history or situation; and, second, this method "aims to be as objective as possible about the nature and power of a religion; it is not concerned with whether a particular faith is true."[9] Is it really possible to be genuinely objective? This is a problem that we shall return to. But there are other difficulties, such as a tendency to assume that we can identify homogeneity and "good doctrinal behavior" in a religion, whereas there is often virtually infinite diversity. And shared features are liable to be taken to exaggerate similarity whereas particular contexts differ greatly.

The phenomenological method defies easy description. Douglas Allen is correct to point out: "The term has become very popular and has been utilized by numerous scholars, who seem to share little if anything in common."[10] Phenomenological comes from phenomenon which literally means "appearance." Thus most phenomenologists try to systematize and classify the phenomena of religion – the things that "appear" to us. Among the numerous schools using this method, the following features seem to be important. The study of religion should be **empirical**, in that one studies religion free from any a priori assumptions; it should be **descriptive** and **historical**, in that one is trying to understand these traditions objectively; and, finally, it will be **anti-reductionist** (i.e. opposed to any attempt to turn religion into a branch of psychology or sociology). It accepts religion as a distinctive phenomenon in its own right.

The phenomenological approach shares with the historical-comparative approach a stress on the need for objectivity when studying religion. Although it is true that some phenomenologists have suggested that the concept of epoché (i.e. a "means of bracketing beliefs

and preconceptions we normally impose on phenomena"[11]) provides a way of empathizing and understanding the object of study which removes the "coldness" that may seem to be a drawback of the traditional detachment of the scholar, most phenomenologists have wanted to stress fairness and the objectivity which that entails.

Objectivity is at the heart of the first two approaches; it is often seen as the central academic virtue. Teachers have power; it would be wrong to abuse that power by attempting to persuade a person to a particular viewpoint. So, one should not admit affinity with any particular tradition. Instead, one simply reports each tradition dispassionately and accurately. Using the best contemporary scholarship, one offers appropriate judgments about the plausibility or otherwise of certain central narratives. So, for example, science has shown that miracles are very unlikely; therefore, it would be fair to suggest that the Krishna stories in Hinduism or the virgin birth story in Christianity are highly improbable, yet without dogmatizing.

This goes along with the assumption of liberal tolerance. One of the hopes that often lies behind religious studies as an academic discipline is the creation of a liberal and understanding culture. As people understand, so they can tolerate. Liberalism in this setting celebrates the right of each individual to affirm his or her own tradition, provided that this affirmation does not exclude others from affirming their traditions.

There is much that is commendable in this approach. Certainly, one hopes that knowledge of other religious traditions will convey an appropriate sense of humility and mutual respect. And the quest for accuracy is a wholly appropriate academic virtue. However, what these two approaches overlook is that the very claim to offer an objective survey of these diverse traditions easily creates a completely misleading impression.

The impression given by such cold, uninvolved accounts is of the essentially arbitrary or even bizarre character of religion. When the beliefs of these different traditions are reported with such detachment and neutrality, students are left bewildered. They are puzzled that anyone can be so certain about a particular religion that he would dedicate his life to it. Further, when they are presented with a stream of unfamiliar names and places, the raw data of a religion, they fail to see the

9   Ninian Smart, "Comparative-Historical Method," in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encylopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan 1987), vol. 3, p. 572.

10   Douglas Allen, "Phenomenology of Religion," in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encylopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan 1987) vol. 11, p. 273.

11   Ibid., p. 281.

achievement and the vibrant reality that attracts people to it. "Objective" study taught by the "dispassionate" and "neutral" teacher creates a world of curiosities. Religions are judged by the canons of neutral scholarship and exposed as equally odd and incredible. Religious traditions come across as antiquated anachronisms that resist progress and promote intolerance. The impression is given that the Western, liberal, scientific world-view is on the whole true and beneficent; tolerance, seen as a major social good, is better assisted by secularism.

The third approach to the study of religion is a strong and total reaction to the dangers in "objectivity." This is the *confessional* approach. Advocates of this approach believe it is better for children and students to "inhabit" and to be instructed within a particular religious tradition, thereby taking religion seriously, than to end up with a secular indifference to all religion. A confessional approach assumes the truth or worth of one tradition, and then may offer an analysis and evaluation of the others. Similarities can be affirmed, but differences must also be confronted. Religious traditions do not all agree. Muslims disagree with Christians over the significance and status of Jesus. This is a disagreement about truth. Therefore both cannot be right – there is a significant issue to be considered. A confessional approach is not afraid to acknowledge this; and it is willing to try to resolve disagreements from the vantage point of a certain tradition.

The difficulty with this approach is clear. By assuming the truth of a tradition, one can easily distort and misrepresent its rivals. So, for example, consider a Christian teacher offering judgments on Islam from the Christian perspective. It is all too easy to move from confronting disagreement to caricature and misunderstanding. So, from the understandable judgment that Muslims are too simplistic when they insist that the doctrine of the Trinity undermines monotheism, it is all too easy to go on to suggest that the distortion was somehow perverse. Judging another tradition by the standards internal to one's own will easily lead to its distortion.

Clearly an alternative approach is needed. This book commends the fourth approach, which John Dunne calls the "process of 'passing over,'"[12] but which I prefer

to call the "empathetic" approach.[13] John Dunne gets to the heart of this approach when he describes the need to understand the outlook of others. He writes:

> You find yourself able to pass over from the standpoint of your life to those of others, entering into a sympathetic understanding of them, finding resonances between their lives and your own, and coming back once again, enriched, to your own standpoint.[14]

We know that every person comes to the study of religion with a particular perspective. Neutrality and objectivity are not options. However, it is a mistake to move from this fact to the conclusion that we are bound to distort and misrepresent each other. Fortunately, this is not the case. When we encounter difference in other areas of society, we find all sorts of ways to understand. It is often in listening to a person's story that we find ourselves empathizing. Humans have a remarkable capacity to use the imagination to enter into positions they do not hold. The imagination is vital in the study of religion.

In this book I have sought to "empathize" with each tradition in turn. Each chapter has attempted to represent each tradition from the perspective of a fairly orthodox adherent, so that it is represented in its *best or most typical light*. Hinduism makes much of its age; Islam stresses rationality; and Confucianism offers its demanding ethic. All these claims can be disputed, and in other parts of the book these claims are challenged. The total experience of the book (and the course, when this book is used as the main text) exposes all the main arguments between the traditions by proceeding along these lines.

What the "best possible light" actually means will vary from tradition to tradition. In persuading others, some traditions are happier to be more self-critical than others. Although Hindus might defend the theory of caste, few would defend the practice. Most Western

12 John Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (London: Sheldon Press 1967), p. ix.

13 I am grateful to my former student Elizabeth Rowland for suggesting this term. Dunne's term stresses the process, while "empathetic" stresses the content. Although Dunne is right to say that one passes over to the object of enquiry and then returns enriched, I want to stress that the return should not happen until one is able to defend the other as if it is one's own.
14 John Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (London: Sheldon Press 1967) p. viii–ix.

Christians would distance themselves from the traditional (i.e New Testament) view of women, while many Muslims want to insist that the Qur'anic understanding of the different gender roles is both appropriate and enlightened. In all three cases, we are talking about the majority of mainstream Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. Judgments of this sort are very difficult to make; they are impressions based on the arguments commonly used to defend each tradition. However, such judgments are required by the empathetic approach. The Reader will reflect these difficult judgments, in both the selection of texts and the surrounding commentary.

For some students, and perhaps some teachers, to empathize with a different tradition seems disloyal to one's own. At this point, one needs to be persuaded that understanding from within a different tradition (in Dunne's terms, "passing over" to it and then "returning") is not an act of disloyalty. In other fields it is considered essential: a physicist wanting to defend her theory works very hard to make sure that the position of an opponent is understood. One does this primarily out of respect for the truth. If one really has the truth about the matter in dispute, then alternatives cannot undermine it. It is only in looking at a tradition with the greatest sympathy and inner understanding that one is really in a position to offer reasons why one might think it mistaken.

The empathetic approach suggests three stages in the study of other religions:

Stage 1: First recognize where one is coming from – the traditions that have influenced one's own upbringing.
Stage 2: Using the imagination, attempt to understand the other tradition sufficiently well to defend it as one's own.
Stage 3: In the light of the first two stages, now make decisions. This will involve either an act of clarification or an act of modification. If one is not persuaded, then one will be in a position to clarify the reasons why one prefers the initial position; if one is persuaded to some degree, then one will find the initial position modified.

Now that we have described and defended the methodological *approach* of this book, it is necessary to ask methodological questions about *content*. The problem is that religion is such a complex phenomenon that the study of the data can come from a variety of perspectives. Richard Comstock lists five.[15] First, one can start with the psychological perspective. Being human involves coping with our "drives" – our feelings of friendship, sexuality, and our hopes for success or power. Freud believed that religious symbols played a repressive role, by controlling certain inner aspirations. Carl Jung believed that religion had a more positive role; it was in some sense necessary to human well-being. The two men shared the belief that religion needs to be examined from the psychological standpoint.

The second perspective is sociological. We have already seen in relation to Durkheim the way in which religion has primarily a social role. From this perspective, its paramount role is the way its community-constructed symbols bind the community together. The third perspective is historical. The earlier two ignore the changes and developments in religion over time; they tend to treat religion in the non-historical abstract. However, ideas arise because of and in relation to a certain context. Some sort of historical account can be offered for every idea; nothing happens in a vacuum. Accounting for change within a religious tradition becomes the paramount task for the historical perspective.

The fourth perspective takes a particular idea (e.g. priest) from one tradition and compares it with the equivalents in other traditions. This is called the "form-comparative" perspective. By taking a particular *form* (a rite or institution) one can *compare* across traditions. This approach tends to concentrate on the ways that traditions operate and coexist today.

The final approach Comstock calls the "hermeneutical or semiological approach."[16] Here the focus is on the symbols underpinning the overt discourse. Although many of the other perspectives take account of the symbolic in their analysis, a growing number of writers have made this much more central. For example, Claude Lévi-Strauss believes that the symbolic is not the realm of blind emotion, but reflects a high and demanding degree of order.

The empathetic approach does not start from any of these perspectives on content, although it may touch on

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[15]   W. Richard Comstock, *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religions* (New York: Harper & Row 1972), pp. 13–17.
[16]   Ibid., p. 16.

all of them. From within, a believer does not organize her tradition into these different perspectives. Faith touches every part of a person's life and presents itself as a whole. Religion touches both the things you believe and the way you behave. To explain from within, one does not use an external discipline (such as psychology) to make sense of one's tradition. In this sense, the phenomenologists are right: religion cannot be reduced to another discipline.

So methodologically, this is a book with a difference. Each tradition is presented in the best possible light. The basic ideas are introduced within a narrative that attempts to persuade the reader. The hope is that anyone who reads the chapter with which they identify will find it fair and persuasive. The total experience of the book is that one is led to sympathize with each tradition. We consider indigenous traditions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Japanese religion, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and emerging religious traditions. Then we end with secular humanism – the challenge to all religions. In each case we seek to listen carefully. We understand, and we engage. Naturally, each chapter is only sufficient to provide an introduction, but it will convey something of the distinctiveness of each tradition, and provide basic knowledge sufficient for understanding more complex material on each tradition.

The book is structured to enable comparison across the chapters. Each chapter starts with a short passage capturing "the mind" of the tradition. This is a representative passage from the tradition, and aims to convey the feel of a tradition. Then we work through "worldviews" (i.e. beliefs), "institutions and rituals" (i.e. experiences of faith within the community), and "ethical expression." Finally, each chapter concludes with the "modern outlook" – an opportunity to look at contemporary trends in the tradition. In each case this section concludes with the story of a twentieth-century adherent – sometimes a convert, sometimes a brilliant exponent. It is often in listening to a person's story that we can best understand another tradition.

Under the ethics section, I have chosen to pay special attention to the "role of women." Naturally, under the ethics heading any number of subjects could have been identified as special examples (e.g. war or ecology). However, an interfaith perspective on women is especially interesting. This is partly because I am persuaded that the patriarchal abuse of women through religion is one of the greatest religious and ethical questions of our time, and partly because an interfaith perspective undermines some of the more simplistic critiques of patriarchy. Anne Primavesi, for example, seems convinced that the eradication of dualism would transform gender power relations.[17] The interfaith perspective throws this into question because the monist traditions are as patriarchal as the dualist ones. The passing over and coming back will not necessary lead to easy or comfortable enrichment; it might instead lead to deep and disturbing bewilderment. This, I think, is the case with the global religious treatment of women.

Defending This Approach

Courses in the study of religions are under increasing attack. Most institutions find themselves required to provide such courses, yet many teachers consider them inappropriate. The problem is that global courses weaving through several traditions create a misleading impression. Superficial (and therefore often misleading) similarities are identified; differences are not really understood. The student is granted the impression of knowing, when in reality greater confusion reigns.

How do we respond to this attack? First of all, we can all agree that the ideal is for a student to spend at least six months living among the adherents of another faith. Perhaps they can master the language; certainly, they should be able to understand the way the lived tradition affects home and work. This is the ideal. However, it is hopelessly impractical. Resources and time will not permit such a global course.

So the question becomes: is it better to have some knowledge of all major traditions or considerable knowledge of a few? Most of us would agree that expertise can only be attained in one or two religions. However, some knowledge of the others is necessary for two reasons. First, we need to make sense of the diversity of religious traditions in the world and perhaps in our own environment. To do this, we need some knowledge of the nature and extent of that diversity. Provided

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[17] See Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns and Oates 1991)

one is aware of the superficiality of that knowledge, it is still better to have some awareness than none at all. Second, our own cultural and religious setting in the West will become unintelligible unless we start understanding the other world faiths. Westerners can now form a strong identification with Buddhism even though they have not learned the primary languages or lived within an overtly Buddhist culture. In other words, part of our cultural setting includes Westerners adopting non-Western traditions. If we want to understand our own cultural and religious situations, we need to understand the nature of such conversions. And to do that we need some understanding of the native traditions that are being developed.

The main anxiety is that a superficial understanding ignores the complexity of the other world faiths. This is where a Reader is invaluable. You cannot come away from primary texts of the major world faiths with the impression that you now know everything there is to know. Each tradition is tricky. Numerous questions will be raised. The Reader, by definition, cannot answer all of them, but it will make it abundantly clear that they exist. It is an introduction to the world faiths whose usefulness will not easily be exhausted.

Although it is hoped that other people will pick up this volume out of interest, the majority of its readers will be students. Chiefly this textbook is intended for students taking an "Introduction to world religions" course, or its equivalent.

Use in the Classroom

For teaching, this text should be used as a basis for lectures, seminars, and classes. It forces students to read some of the primary material underpinning each tradition. It is intended as a discussion starter, encouraging students to think through questions about truth, the relation of religion and society, the impact of religion on women, and the changing nature of a tradition in the modern world.

The fact sheets at the end of each chapter provide a revision summary of the major points. The sheets include the following: "A Selected Summary of Beliefs," "Historical Highlights," "Major Festivals," "Key Terms," and questions for discussion and essays. These questions divide into two types: those that reflect on the material in the chapter and those that invite comparisons with other sections of the book.

Trying to understand the unfamiliar is a difficult task. The task is made harder by the enormous language barrier between the traditions. So, in an attempt to make life a little easier, the book has followed the following language rule. Where possible words in other languages (e.g. Sanskrit) are transliterated in a way that more or less reflects their English pronunciation. No distinction has been made between long and short vowels. Naturally, where a text has used a different principle, then this has been respected.